

Me? An Evangelist?

Sermon #4: Does Evangelism Really Matter?

Luke 15:1-10

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When she was younger, Sydney formed attachments to different stuffed animals and dolls. Two of her favorites were twin Barbie dolls. She named them Kackey and Yay-Yay. For awhile there, Kackey and Yay-Yay went everywhere with us. Until one day, after we had left the YMCA, Sydney realized Kackey and Yay-Yay had been left behind. They were lost. On our next trip back we inquired about their whereabouts, but sadly, Kackey and Yay-Yay never reappeared. Syd was sad for a few days, before deciding on a new favorite toy. But those few days were distressing for her, because something very valuable to her – Kackey and Yay-yay – was lost.

Today we conclude our sermon series on evangelism by asking why this evangelism stuff matters in the first place. If you remember, the first week we came to the conclusion that all we have to do to be evangelists is be ourselves, because we are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. In our second sermon, we figured out who some people were that we could share the Good News with, and we made our own impact lists with their names on it. Last week, we talked about what we would talk about with them, and determined that all we really need to do is to tell our story.

So we know who we are, we know who they are, and we know what we say, which brings us to today's question: So what? Why is this important? Why are we spending four weeks talking about it? We know that inviting people to church should be something we do, but why is it any more important than, say, providing snacks at Coffee Fellowship or attending worship or helping with the Birthday Dinner and Auction? Why should this be more important than those things or anything else we do in church?

I'm going to be honest with you, reaching out to people is important, but there are some costs involved. Evangelism takes time and energy, as you build relationships with people and walk beside them as they begin to explore their own faith. It requires time for prayer as you prepare yourself to help them. It can cost money – lunches, long-distance calls if the person lives far away, maybe even monetary assistance to help meet their needs. Evangelism is also costly in the sense that you make yourself vulnerable to the other person as you tell your story. And it can be complicated, as your life and faith gets entangled with someone else's, as you trade your independence for the interdependence of a growing relationship with another person.

Evangelism is not a cost-free, risk-free venture. But our scriptures today give us a glimpse of the invaluable rewards. Our first reading is the Great Commission, where Jesus tells his followers to make disciples of all nations. A more literal translation turns this into a verb; it literally says to go and "disciplize." Evangelizing an active verb, sharing your story is an activity; there's nothing passive about it. It requires intentional action on the part of the disciplizer and the disciplizee. Disciplizing others is so important that Jesus uses his last teaching moment on earth to instruct his disciples to go, be themselves, and tell their story of their time with him.

Our second scripture has Jesus telling two parables about lost things being found. He actually follows these up with a more famous third parable which we didn't read, the

parable of the prodigal son, which is also a parable about something lost being found. A shepherd leaves behind 99 sheep in search of the one that is lost. Hebrew women were given 10 silver coins as wedding presents, coins that were both valuable and had sentimental value, like a wedding ring. And when the woman loses one of these coins, she searches every nook and cranny until it is found. A father's son takes his inheritance and leaves, only to return penniless and penitent, and is welcomed with open arms and a party. The lost son is found.

Until we are in God's arms, until we are resting in the comfort of God's presence, God is looking for us. Until we are found by God, we are lost. And like the shepherd and the woman and the father, God will not stop searching for us until we are found. Now most of us here today, we're the 99 sheep, we're the 9 coins. Praise God that we have been found, and isn't it great being found? But there are still a lot of people out there who haven't been found. And God is looking for them.

Why would the God of the universe, the Creator of the heavens and the oceans and the mountains, care about one little lost person? Wouldn't it be easier to cut your losses and tend to the 99 sheep? Does everyone matter? Aren't there some people in this world that don't matter? The gas station attendant, the waitress, the guy driving the slow-moving car in front of me, the neighbor with the barking dog, the relative who lied to me or hurt me deeply, the pedophile, the prisoner on death row. They don't matter, do they?

The fact is: they do matter, whether we agree or not. We all matter to God, every one of us. If our value in God's eyes was determined by how deserving we are of divine love, we would all be lost. But our value is not determined by our worthiness; it's determined by the expansiveness of God's grace. God's grace and mercy are so wide that every single person can fit. We are as valuable to God as the sheep was to the shepherd, as the coin was to the woman, as a child is to a parent. You have never looked at another human being who isn't valuable to God. That's why we can't let evangelism slip, why fulfilling the Great Commission should be our top priority; people matter to God, so they should matter to us, too.

In "Becoming a Contagious Christian," Bill Hybels lists a number of benefits for sharing the Good News with others: the sense of adventure and purpose, the feeling of fulfillment and your own spiritual growth, the honor of serving as God's agent in the world. But there was one benefit of evangelism that spoke the most to me.

Hybels tells about a survey that asked people who were 95 years old or older what they'd do differently if they could live their lives over again. If they could do it all again, knowing what they know after 95 years, what would they change? Three things stood out.

First, they'd reflect more. They'd spend less time in the daily grind and more time looking at the direction and meaning of their lives. And in doing so, they said they would make sure the majority of their time and energy was going to worthwhile causes. Second, they'd risk more. Given another chance, they said they'd be more courageous about stepping outside their comfort zones, in order to raise their accomplishment levels and make life more interesting.

Thirdly, and most importantly, the elderly people said they would do more things that will outlive them. They would leave a legacy, not of possessions and wealth, but a legacy of changed lives. Helping to change someone's life by bringing them into a relationship with God – by helping God find them – has eternal significance.

Evangelism can be costly, it can cost time and energy and money, it may make you vulnerable; it can complicate your life. But so does being born. And growing up. And getting married. And having children. And buying a house. And, for that matter, becoming a Christian. And yet, knowing the costs of those things, would you choose not to do them? Of course not! Why? Because the rewards are so great. Same with evangelism. Whatever costs you incur are minimal compared to the overwhelming reward of knowing you helped change someone's life by opening the door to a relationship with God. There's no greater legacy than that.

Remember the three parables about the lost things being found? Do you remember how they ended? In each case, the finder calls their friends together and says, "Rejoice with me!" Instead of punishing him, the father throws a big party when his prodigal son returns. Hybels says, "Retrieval results in rejoicing." Jesus says there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God when even one person is found.

You are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. You have people in your lives who don't know that God is looking for them. You have a story to tell them. Jesus has commanded us to go and make disciples of all nations, to help find the lost, just as we have been found. Making disciples doesn't mean converting people to a philosophy or a belief system. In fact, it doesn't mean converting people at all. That's not in our power. Only Christ can do the big things, like conversion, repentance, or moving a person to a decision of faith – all authority and power is his, not ours. But in order for Christ to do his thing, we have to do ours. We can and must do the little thing of "disciplining" others – listening to them, spending time with them, serving them, loving them. Our task is not to change their lives; that's up to God. Our task is to show them that their lives can be changed, just as ours were, and to invite them into that new way of living. That's our vision at CCC: To be a thriving congregation that changes lives through Christ. That's why evangelism should be at the top of our list of things to do as Christians.

God needs our help. We don't have to find all the lost sheep, only one. You never know when the simple invitation you are offering will make a difference in someone's life that will have eternal significance. And then God will rejoice because one more sheep that was lost has been found.